

RPG Reload File 005 – ‘Saturday Morning RPG’

[September 11, 2014](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome once again to the **RPG Reload**, your weekly dose of words about RPGs, where every morning is Saturday morning, and we are all wearing our metaphorical pajamas. Every week, we tune in for a rerun of an RPG from App Store days gone by for a little reflection and revisiting. I'll do my best to keep things a bit varied and balanced between the many different kinds of RPGs out there, but once a month, in order to defend human freedom against my ruthless determination to rule the world, the selection falls to you, the reader. Our next reader's choice feature will be in **RPG Reload 008**, so please vote for the RPG you want to see me write about in either the comments below or the [Official RPG Reload Club](#) thread in our forums. Those are also both great places to share your thoughts, experiences, fresh comedy, and knowledge.

This week, however, I'm in Battlecat's saddle, and I've decided to go with something a bit more low key than the more famous hits of previous reloads. This week, I'm going for nostalgia of a different sort by looking at Mighty Rabbit's *Saturday Morning RPG* ([Free](#)), an underappreciated little gem if there ever was one, in my opinion. Like many of the cartoons of our youth, it was clearly meant to span more episodes than it will ever get, and in its current state, it barely runs over the 10-hour mark, but it's a really good 10 hours, especially if the nostalgia lines up with you. Also, in some good news, there is at least one more episode coming, and I have to guess that it will provide a bit of closure to the whole thing. Even as it stands, however, I think

this is a pretty special game.



I think most fans of RPGs will have, at some point, come into contact with one of Nintendo's *Mario* RPGs. Whether it's the original Square-developed *Super Mario RPG*, the *Paper Mario* games from Intelligent Systems, or the *Mario & Luigi* games from ex-Square Alpha Dream, the *Mario* RPGs are actually among the highest-selling RPGs worldwide, and with good reason. They're incredibly accessible, make good use of humor, and use a variety of techniques to make the battles a bit more active for the player. These games bridge the gap between the RPG hardcore and the less RPG-savvy *Mario* fanbase without pushing away either. Well, usually, anyway. I'm not here to write a defense of *Paper Mario: Sticker Star*. They're fun, approachable games that manage to turn RPG conventions on their heads here and there in very clever ways, with a loving wink to the crowd to let everyone know there's no spite involved.

Hey, wait, why am I talking about *Mario* RPGs? This article is supposed to be about *Saturday Morning RPG*! Well, I'm talking about them for two reasons: First, because I love those games and will write words about them any

chance I get, but more relevantly, I'm doing it because *Saturday Morning RPG* is the closest thing to a *Mario* RPG we've got on the App Store, and likely the closest we'll ever have for quite some time. All those nice things I say up there about the *Mario* RPGs apply to *Saturday Morning RPG* as well. I mean, except for the highest-selling thing, unfortunately. Now, you might think that none of this is a surprise, since the developer themselves openly state the *Mario* games were one of their inspirations. Listing off inspirations is easy, though. Actually doing them justice is another matter entirely.



It's a tricky thing to pull off, and it's very easy to overdo certain things and miss others on your first swing, and that's just what happened with *Saturday Morning RPG's* initial release. I'm getting ahead of myself, though. Let's start with a brief outline of the game. The game follows the story of Marty Michael Hall, a regular teenager who comes into possession of a magical faux-Trapper Keeper that allows him to fight the surprisingly rampant cartoon evils that plague his hometown of Shadow Valley. The exploration portions of the game are very similar to other JRPG-style games, but the battle system is a little bit different. It relies very heavily on magic attacks, with your only melee attack option doing very little damage. You can also use your turn to

charge up your next attack. Much like the *Mario* RPGs, most of your actions can be enhanced with timing-based taps or other brief inputs. Good timing will increase the damage you deal, decrease the damage enemies deal, and build up your magic meter.

One of these inputs involves tapping as quickly as you can on the screen, and this was one of the things that initially put some off of *Saturday Morning RPG*. When it released, the only way to charge up your next attack was to use a rapid-tap input. Since each of your magic items has a limited number of uses per fight and the melee attack is nearly useless, you're going to want to charge up your attacks almost every time. In hindsight, it's not hard to see why people ended up putting the game down. They probably needed to go get some ice for their poor fingers. A later update added two other methods of charging up attacks, one timing-based and the other a simple matter of selecting it from the menu. With that addition, the battle system finally found its footing. It errs a bit on the easy side, but the wide variety of attacks keep things fresh, the various mid-battle inputs keep you engaged, and for the most part, enemies don't take too long to finish off.



The magic attacks are one of the big areas where *Saturday Morning RPG* flexes its nostalgia muscles. You can bring five different magic items into battle with you, and each one can be used a limited amount of times in a single fight. Each new chapter added has brought a handful of new items with it, and the span of references to 1980s pop culture has become very wide. They include references to things that still have a fair bit of cultural cachet like the *Transformers* and some real "you had to be there" stuff like the bizarre McDonald's character Mac Tonight. There are so many different items to find, and they come so frequently, you'll constantly have new toys to play with. The balance on these items is absolutely all over the place, with some of them proving to be ridiculously overpowered, like the near-gamebreaking *Karate Kid* headband, and others seemingly just there for a punchline, like the B.B. Gun found in the Christmas episode that lives up to its reference to a tee.

These shots of nostalgia go nicely with the main course, which is served up in the game's story and exploration scenes. One funny thing about *Saturday Morning RPG* is that what was originally just meant to be a nostalgia piece for the 1980s is also starting to get the air of circa-2010 nostalgia about it. The game obviously piles on the references to things like *GI Joe*, *Back To The Future*, *Ghostbusters*, Chuck E. Cheese, and John Hughes movies, but it also refers to contemporary-at-the-time memes like Rickrolling and Shia LaBeouf's penchant for saying the word 'no' a lot in his movies. There's a silly sense of humor to the game that fits the theme of a 1980s cartoon perfectly. Goofy, sometimes stupid, but always charming in its sincerity. Not every joke lands well even in that capacity, with the constant barrage of bear jokes, for example, overstaying their welcome, but enough of them find their target that it's easy to forgive those that don't.



The exploration bits do a good job of encouraging you to look around. You are awarded experience points just for touching certain out of the way areas, rare stickers and items can be found in hidden places, and sub-quests often have you covering a fair bit of ground to solve them. In the first two episodes, this can be a bit of a drag at times due to Marty's slow walking speed and the frequent battles, but from the third episode on, you have access to Marty's hoverboard, which greatly increases the speed of his movement. Only rarely do puzzles venture beyond fetching things and flipping switches, but when they do, they can be downright obscure in their solutions. The most difficult of the lot is probably the one found in the somewhat rough first episode. There's a door you need to open, and the only way to do it is to use the switches above the door to play the main hook to a somewhat well-known 80s hit.

Actually, I want to talk about that first episode a bit. Chances are good that for most people, it's their only experience with *Saturday Morning RPG*, and that's a real shame. Each new episode has shown considerable gains in design sophistication, and that first episode doesn't play any better now than it did when I first played it. The references are decent enough, and it

does its job of introducing you to the mechanics of the game, but it does so in a very dull way. There's very little enemy variety, not a lot of items to play with, and you spend almost the whole time in a very drab cave setting. Other than leaving Marty with the magic book, it also has very little actual story significance. If you walked away from the game based on the first episode, I implore you to give the game another chance. It gets a lot better, I promise.



The shining example of that is the game's most recent episode as of the time of writing this article, the 2012 Christmas Special. Had this ended up the game's final episode, it would have been more than fitting, because it's hard to imagine how they could capture the essence of 80s children's programming better than they do here. The ending is just perfect, and has ensured that *Saturday Morning RPG* will stay in my Christmas game rotation for a long time to come. It's not the longest episode, clocking in at around two hours, but it truly demonstrates a development team that has become comfortable with what it's doing. The main dungeon for this episode avoids the excessive length of the Jean Claude Van Dam from the third episode, but still offers up a lot of side paths and a puzzle or two to keep it from being a combat tunnel like the dungeons in the first two episodes tended to be. It's

also not nearly as buggy as the third chapter sometimes can be. Combat encounters are more interesting thanks to the present boxes, and the enemies that can paralyze you are an effective foil for Marty's excessive power by this point.

As is ideally the case with homegrown iOS games, *Saturday Morning RPG* has only gotten better with time. The main problems with the initial app came from the excessive tapping and the relatively small amount of content, and both of those things have been addressed satisfactorily, in my opinion. The design has also matured with each new added episode, and it makes me kind of sad that this team is most likely not going to be able to keep working on this type of game in the future. I'd really love to see what they would come up with if they went from the ground up on a new RPG, with everything they've learned. The app itself still holds up nicely thanks to Mighty Rabbit keeping on top of new developments with each content update. It fills the screen nicely, the 3D backgrounds look sharp, and the super-chunky pixels of the sprite characters look, well, they still look super-chunky, but they're supposed to. There are a few lingering bugs with some of the subquest event flags in the third episode, but they can usually be cleared up by saving and restarting the app.



Now, obviously, *Saturday Morning RPG*'s nostalgia isn't going to work out for everyone, but I think the game can stand on its own even if you aren't temporally aligned with its sense of humor. Whatever the initial plans might have been, it's clear that the game isn't ever going to be a big, massive, genre-defining RPG. I dare say, though I wish the developer had seen slightly better reward for it, the game itself has more or less turned out to be just what it ought to have been, and I think cutting back on its ambition was absolutely key to that. It's a slice of RPG comfort food. It's earnest, endlessly enthusiastic, and short enough that it's very easy to slide into the occasional gap in your RPG schedule. The pacing is very uneven, but it works out okay overall due to the episode-based format slicing things up into discrete chunks. Could it be more balanced, more challenging, bigger, more refined? Sure, but I think I love it partly because it's not those things. *Saturday Morning RPG* is like a meta-example of dreaming big, falling down, and picking yourself up and making the best of it anyway. If that's not a end-of-episode moral worthy of a thumbs-up from *GI Joe's Shipwreck*, I don't know what is.

At any rate, that's just what I think of the game. It's definitely a

recommended reload in my books, especially if you haven't looked in on it since its launch. What do you folks think? Am I crackers for loving this game? Hopped up on 1980s nostalgia goofballs? Please leave your comments below or chime in at the [Official RPG Reload Club](#). Don't forget to vote for the game you want to see in the next reader's choice article, please. Otherwise, it's going to go to something silly that got, like, three votes. By the power of Greyskull, you have the power, so exercise it. I'll be back next week with another dive into RPG Video Land. As always, thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload Hint: *Getting a sequel to this classic is proving to be a distant objective.*